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# Omission in Emberá (Chocó) Mythography

*Myth collection as historical encounter*

Uncertain of the systematic difference my presence as a woman might produce, I leave my place of shared culture and enter "the field"—the riverine forests of the Emberá Indians in Panama.[1] In the Gap of Darién, so called because it is the only place left uncut by the highway that extends from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, I search for ways of thinking through to our hearts and find a language in which "heart" (*so*) is synonymous with "intent." In that language there is a myth about a heroic transgressor with an obsessive desire to drink menstrual blood. The women hate him and send him on otherworld adventures hoping to kill the man-son. He is Jëröpoto, whose name means Born-of-the-Calf (of the leg), a name that calls to mind a birth from a wound that was not a womb, a birth that was the childbearer's death. In his quest to know the meaning of his name, Jëröpoto fears no challenge. He kills the river serpent Jë, the most dangerous and fertile of mythic devourers. He eats its heart and returns to the women again.

The myth is central to the Emberá corpus and in the course of two months in 1983 and twelve in 1984–85, I record three versions. In all three, the cyclic structure is set in motion by the women's anger at the hero's unwholesome desire. The force of their mythic anger perplexes me in a familiar way. While their anger clearly manifests a struggle to protect their right to privacy during menstruation, this adamant need for privacy, common to women of many cultures, seems as much a matter of subjection as right. Returning from the field, I have no trouble finding other published versions of the myth. In fact, I find reference to fifteen.[2] The surprising thing is, that among those fifteen, there was no mention of mothers' menstrual blood.

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> Women are, in fact, caught in a very real contradiction. Throughout the course of history, they have been mute, and it is doubtless by virtue of this mutism that men have been able to speak and write. As long as women remain silent, they will be outside the historical process. But, if they begin to speak and write *as men do*, they will enter history subdued and alienated; it is a history that, logically speaking, their speech should disrupt. (Gauthier:1981: 162-63)

For many indigenous peoples, the collection, recording and analysis of oral literature marks their entrance into that history of the Western world of which Gauthier writes. The moment of entrance is significant because it has the potential to introduce speech of or about women who have not yet been subdued or alienated by the historical discourses with which they will contend, at least not in the same way as the speech of women who have been shaped by these discourses.[3] Or the moment of entrance is significant because it may be the moment that women's speech is again extracted, made absent in the transition to Western history. These two alternatives take concrete form in, on the one hand, the systematic inclusion of the menstrual blood motif in the versions of the Jëröpoto myth I collected, and, on the other, its systematic exclusion in prior versions. The alternatives present mythographers with a choice that is a matter of awareness and politics that transcends, even while grounded in, our comings and goings in any particular field.

Considered as historical encounter, myth collection is a complex act of intersecting, unequal, cross-cultural representation in which both myth-teller and mythographer manipulate texts strategically. When a myth-teller comes from the culture of the colonized and a mythographer from the culture of a colonizing power, mythography, like ethnography more generally, is part of a larger colonial encounter (Fabian 1983). Because of this, a myth produced for a mythographer is not an historically neutral fragment of indigenous culture. It is, rather, a representation of indigenous culture produced for the mythographer and an index of historical relations between colonizer and colonized.

The perspectives of myth-teller and mythographer thus determine, in part, the content and subsequent interpretations of mythic texts. Mythography among the Emberá is a case in point. As a people indigenous to the Chocó region of Colombia and the Darién region of Panama, the Emberá have reproduced their culture in the context of over five centuries of European and North American efforts to colonize, missionize and develop.[4] Myth-telling is a fundamental part of this process of cultural reproduction. Emberá myths encode Emberá ideas about themselves, their humanity and their culture. It is important to remember that these Emberá ideas are always in part constructed in the context of, and

against, the ideas of colonizing others, who, in contrast, tend to think of Indians as those who are in need of certain forms of civilizing. These civilizing forms include gender inequalities characteristic of patriarchal societies.

The Western world's civilizing attitude obscures the nature and limits of women's action and power in societies where gender divisions are more egalitarian, such as among the Emberá. A civilizing attitude creates an attitude of resistance in those it greets. These attitudes are at cross purposes and tend to create situations in which Emberá myth-tellers give mythographers just what the Emberá have come to expect that the colonizer wants, without giving anything away. However, there are ways to disrupt this fixation of attitudes. Becoming open to aspects of indigenous culture usually missing from colonial discourse, such as women's experience, is one way. Rejecting aspects of Western culture commonly associated with colonial discourse, such as monotheism, is another way. The disuption may create a context in which difference can be more truly communicated and acknowledged.

In sum, this paper explores the implications of the problem of omission in Emberá mythography. In it, I present a feminist interpretation of the Jëröpoto myth in which the menstrual blood motif is key. The interpretation uses received categories of myth analysis critically in order to understand the forces which condition women's subjectivity. As these same forces mark the complex and contradictory site of the Emberá's recent encounter with the nation-state, the interpretation provides a perspective on a phenomenon whose scope expands outward from the women at its center. The systematic omission, which would have effectively eliminated the possibility of making this interpretation had I not collected three versions, is considered in this context. Analysis of the circumstances of textual production and interpretation gives us an ambivalent hold on the moment of Emberá entrance into our history and traces the outline of a mythic text whose mythologizing is not contained by its story.

## CONTEXT

### *The Emberá situated in the world as we know it*

The Emberá are slash and burn horticulturalists who supplement their diet by hunting, fishing, gathering, and more recently, buying canned goods. A dispersed settlement pattern is traditional. It is consistent with an ecology of tropical forest subsistence and a history of colonialism that has required tactical evasions. Since the conquest, the Emberá

have settled the Chocó and the Darién, pushing further and further up rivers towards the mountain peaks between Colombia and Panama. In this way, they have managed to keep themselves apart and, at the same time, establish links to acquire trade goods from the outside world.

The historical tendency of the Emberá to situate themselves apart enough to maintain autonomy, yet close enough to acquire things from outside Emberá culture, is encoded in the structure of Jëröpoto. In its most common contemporary form, independent households of Emberá, headed by a married man and woman, bring surplus agricultural produce downriver in canoes to predominantly non-Indian town-dwellers. With money from produce, Emberá buy goods in the stores and bars, returning upriver with things such as cloth for women's skirts, men's clothes, bullets, aluminum pots, plastic buckets, salt, sugar. In the myth, mythical beings replace historical figures, and the regions outside settlement are unexplored places in natural and other worlds, rather than the non-Indian towns of history. But movement away from and back to the safety of settlements that results in retrieval of desirable objects is a persistent theme in both myth and history.

Dramatic historical discontinuities, however, are not encoded in myth. Recent agrarian reform and highway construction initiated an unprecedented increase in the population of Darién, where I have worked. Now there is no more upriver for the Emberá to go. In the last twenty years, the Emberá began moving dispersed households into villages and have begun to develop a formal political system to argue in the national legislature for government schools and clinics, as well as to establish claims to an Emberá land reserve. By the time this myth was told to me, over seventy-five percent of the Emberá had moved into villages (Herlihy 1986). The telling of the myth should be considered in the context of these historical changes. The Emberá are more and more tightly surrounded by the "outside," more and more intricately articulated with the state as well as the increasingly complicated and controlled international networks of culture and economy of which the state is a part. While the content of the myth does not integrate the historical forces of the moment, the implications of Emberá using mythic logic as a perspective on the present moment warrants consideration, especially in regard to women's roles.

*Emberá storytelling*

Storytelling figures prominently in traditional Emberá life, ideally sketched: The houses are made of gathered materials; thatch comes down low on two sides but walls stand open to air, light, long river views. Men and women spend their days working at tasks apportioned by gender:

farming orchards of plantains and fields of corn and rice; hunting, fishing; gathering wild fruits, shellfish, leaves, bark, flowers, wood from the wild forest; caring for each other and their children. Storytelling is the pastime of the late afternoon and evening, when people return from work and gather round the hearth in expectation of the evening meal, or more often, at the peaceful quiet time when the women finish cooking and cleaning, have spread the sleeping mats out on the floor, and are lying beside the children. In fact, storytelling is an important part of almost all social gatherings, from work parties to curing rituals.

This ideal dimension of life still exists for the Emberá with whom I work, side-by-side with radical change. Their houses, once dispersed singly or in twos and threes along the riverbanks, have been moved into villages of ten to a hundred houses. Some houses in the larger villages have walled divisions inside and tin roofs above; these are constructed with store-bought materials from town. Once autonomous households now elect representatives of their village, river and region. The Emberá have unified and organized; children go to village schools taught mostly by non-Indians. And storytelling is still the pastime of the late afternoon and evening, when people return from work and gather round the hearth in expectation of the evening meal, and more often, at the peaceful quiet time when the women finish cooking and cleaning . . .

"Come back in the afternoon," the tellers say, "that is the time we tell stories." I return and wait for the family to settle in the darkness, preparing tape-recorder by the shy light of lamps made out of baking soda tins filled with kerosene, or a flashlight. Ready, I hand the microphone to the storyteller, and we sit around and listen. At least one of us chooses to respond, inserting *mmmm*'s of acknowledgement at the end of lines, *aho!*s of surprise at the end of episodes, questions in sections that arouse curiosity or confusion. When the story ends, we listen again to the recording.

Story by story I began to collect the texts which together compose a rich Emberá corpus composed of images that link these people with others who live now and some who live no longer in the lowland forests of South America. Everyone who listens knows the stories, although sometimes someone brings a new one. There always seem to be at least one or two people, of either gender and any age, who have a special talent for conveying mythic memory with gesture, humor and suspense. They assemble the motifs they know in their own way, often leaving what may, from an inexperienced listener's point of view, be perceived as gaps. But the gaps do not disturb experienced listeners, whose background knowledge provides the missing motifs required for understanding. That telling actively draws on the knowledge of the listeners is explicit in the

process of translation from Emberá to Spanish, when the translator must consciously replicate this retrieval of motif from memory. The more stories collected and translated, the more apparent it becomes that motifs are like interchangeable parts in the construction of particular stories. In this sense, Jëröpoto is a foundation myth in the Emberá corpus, because a large number of motifs, available for other stories, are tied to memory by its dramatic theme.

## METHOD

Mythography practiced with a feminist perspective has the potential to transform myth collection as historical encounter. It can do more than present women's experience as a way of filling some gap in knowledge, making "our" knowledge of "them" more complete. Differences in the kind of material collected may be used to challenge and advance methods of scholarship. What is the significance of menstrual blood's omission in the text, in the culture that produces the text, and in the culture that collects the text? A method of mythic analysis is developed here to answer this question. Like the question, the method reaches out of the text and into the context of everyday life.[5]

In particular, the case of omission discussed here calls for the use and reworking of Lévi-Straussian structural analysis (1963:213). That the hero's movement in and out of Emberá culture structures the myth, whether or not the menstrual blood motif is present, attests to the strength of structural analysis to decode textual logic. One version is sufficient for analysis if finding the logic of a text, the resolution of contradiction, is the aim. However, if analysis aims at understanding how contradictions and ambiguities enable the production of logics which contest one another, one version of a text may be insufficient. The systematic difference in collection discovered here suggests that multiple versions of mythic texts may provide the kind of material needed to analyze mythic texts as fields of cultural contestation.

In addition, the method developed here considers logical structures discovered through Lévi-Straussian analysis in relation to the ethnographic and historic ground of myth-telling. Analysis shifts back and forth between text and context, finding points of coincidence between the logic of myth, everyday practice and historical experience. Shifting between types of cultural objects brought into analysis brings the fullness of ethnographic understanding to abstract structures of logic and works to establish the ethnographic validity of interpretations that make use of

them. And actually, bringing everyday practice into focus is what makes it possible to consider mythic logic and historical experience from the point of view of women and girls at all.

It must be pointed out, however, that creative approaches to scholarship create problems as well as solutions. While the method of myth analysis used here lends validity to abstract structural analysis, at a certain point and with certain topics, empirical validity is an extremely difficult state to achieve. How do you discuss the meaning of a non-discussable topic like menstruation? The logic of menstruation may be coded into myth and everyday life, but the connection between the two may never be made explicit in native discourse. Moreover, it is precisely the implicitness of the connection, if my analysis is correct, that is necessary to its ideological function. What then can we substitute for straightforward native exegesis? Being "in the field" collecting and "away from the field" writing exacerbates this problem, but in any case, it is one that will have to be worked through in future feminist studies.

## THE JËRÖPOTO MYTH: TEXT AND INTERPRETATION

Everyone's heard the story of Jëröpoto. High-water whirlpools on one sharp bend up the Chico River that once were the river serpent Jë now evoke reference to the Jë that lives in the Ancient Times of myth. Geography keys everyday life to mythic text and subtext; a web of signification spreads outward from Jë, serpent and morpheme.[6] Jë the fertile serpent of devouring is movement from above to below, generator of water, rivers and the territories they traverse; *jebé,* the crab whose moltings convey immortality and the duality of predator and prey (the crab kills Jë and then gets eaten by one called Jëpa); *jënene,* the tree from which water originally burst forth and *jëntsra,* the mother-ant whose scheming is the cause of water's original release. We find the text again with *jedeko* the moon, timer of women's cycles, the one entity Jëröpoto could not depose; and *jëa,* the peach palm fruit, which Jëröpoto brings back from his otherworld fall. *Jemeneto* or *jemenede* are the rites of puberty which brings us out of the story and into the lives of real Emberá women. The web of Jë catches on to forest life by its features, taking imagination in and out of story, and pulling along thoughts about the makings of selves and others.

The following is a rough translation of one version of the story of Jëröpoto (the interpretation following the text draws from all three versions):[7]

1. In our times of old there was a man.
2. There was a man called Jëröpoto.
3. When it was woman's moon-time he would go to collect.
4. So he lived this way: "Women, give me your blood at moon-time."
5. He asked the women so many times for this, in time they hated him.
6. "Well, this man, why does he ask for blood?"
7. And they spoke about this, and thought: "This one we are going to kill."
8. And so they told this to the others.
9. "Well, let's say Sokerreta [bad spirit with much blood], let's say."
10. "Let's tell him: 'Sokerreta killed your mother'."
11. Well then they say that Jëröpoto went to kill Sokerreta.
12. Well he went to the base of the mountain.
13. Well, the base of the mountain, walk, walk, walk . . . and he arrived at the stream above.
14. Well when he arrived at the source of that stream, he saw animal droppings as big as cow dung.
15. "Look at this great pile of manure! What droppings could these be?"
16. "It's this one that killed my mother."
17. "If this one killed my mother, after it I will go."
18. So after he walked, after he walked, when he walked he came to see a cave.
19. Well, at once then, an area of short grass, clean as if grazed.
20. Clean, it was eaten, and another trampled cow dung.
21. Well then, he wanted to go inside there.
22. He was very brave, he was.
23. Well like, it was well then, it's said that he shouted and heard a great noise from within.
24. It's closed up inside. Ho!
25. Well then he remained thinking.
26. He said, "I am going to the house, I."
27. Because he was alone, well he was in this, "I'm going to look for a companion," he said.
28. He arrived at his house, they say.
29. "Well women," they say he said, "I told you, I want the stuff."
30. "Again that guy came," they say they said.
31. "He's asking for that blood, where are we going to get the blood to give him?" they said.
32. Well then, already later, well say, Ah!
33. They say he said a cave.
34. In the base of the mountain it is.
35. They said a cave in the base of the mountain.
36. There is a trampled cow dung, "That one, I'm going to kill," he said.
37. Then well, he went and built a platform.
38. Above then, he tied a platform with stick and twine.

39. In the entrance of the door, well then, in the entrance of the door, after he tied it, then he grabbed a conch shell.
40. Well then, he played that conch shell, tooo, tooo, tooo.
41. When he did this? Thunder.
42. Ho! In that, they say, there were two small boys.
43. Encouraging them, they say he said: "You two cut branches," they say he said.
44. There, there were all classes of animals.
45. All classes of animals were coming out.
46. A sufficient height, no more, they say he made the platform.
47. Ho! When in this came a group of animals, they say a cow.
48. The cow, they all came leaving.
49. They say they are.
50. They say all kinds went, squirrels, toucans.
51. Ho! then well like monkey.
52. Ho! then well like monkeys are coming.
53. If this [Sokerreta] catches a person, they say it can kill a person.
54. Well, then, they grabbed the animals and were killing them.
55. In that, he thrust below with his lance.
56. He thrust downward.
57. The cow was falling, they said.
58. That one went falling.
59. All that were little animals below were eating it.
60. Until all was finished, they say that.
61. Well, then, now yes, as all were finished.
62. After, now they went down.
63. They say they went.
64. Jëröpoto and the two boys went down in that cave, inside they went, they say.
65. Inside. See the fortitude of this man!
66. Well then, they went into the cave.
67. Well then, they say they went inside the cave with a lamp.
68. They went walking toward the inside.
69. They say he had little companions.
70. Then there were three.
71. And they went inside.
72. When they were in that one.
73. They say they went to find a little old woman and they say that her hair was already white, like a grandmother.
74. Already below the earth, where it was the lands of the spirits they call the Chämberara.
75. Well then, they went to see the little old woman.
76. Killed her, they say.
77. Well yes, they went looking.
78. Seeing the solitary house.

79. There is where they had the gold.
80. The size of a soccer ball,they say it was thrown there.
81. Gold.
82. Well then, to the others, to the others that were like sons to him.
83. They say he said: "You also take some," he said.
84. They grabbed a little one, like a little rock, and when they rubbed it, the gold shined through.
85. Well then, they carried it outside the cave, and went home.
86. "Well women," he said, "there still isn't any for me, that blood I commanded you to save."
87. "From where are we going to give that blood to you?"
88. When moon-time flows.
89. He kept asking then, to drink blood.
90. Well, the women said: "The moon killed your mother."
91. "My mother, I want to know who killed her."
92. "It was like that," they said, "the moon killed her."
93. Well then, upon hearing that the moon killed her, he said: "If the moon killed her, I'm going to knock it to the ground."
94. Well then they say he descended from the house early in the morning.
95. Well then, he cut a piece of *chogorro* [bamboo], well in that he said: "*chogorro, chogorro, chogorro, chogorro, chogorro, chogorro* . . ."
96. It went growing straight up to the sky.
97. It arrived at the top of the sky.
98. Then, they said it reached the top.
99. Then he did that.
100. It's said that he went up on that *chogorro.*
101. Climbing on that, they say he was arriving.
102. Then, about to grasp the moon.
103. Then, the woodpecker below on his *chogorro.*
104. He pecked.
105. In that when he pecked.
106. Then the end was near.
107. Ho! when it broke all at once.
108. Jëröpoto, they say he went. Ho!
109. Then they say, falling from above.
110. All at once.
111. He went to where the Chämberara are.
112. All of a sudden he passed into the land below.
113. Well, he arrived there at the place of the Chämberara whose assholes were closed.
114. He went to grab the Chämberara and open them.
115. They say in that, they say there was, a pretty little stream!
116. It was.
117. In that stream.
118. After he arrived he remained seated.
119. He bathed.

120. They say he hadn't eaten.
121. Where is he going to eat?
122. "There were people around here," they say he said thus.
123. In this stream.
124. He doesn't know in which stream he arrived.
125. Then he went upstream, they say.
126. A pretty stream.
[There is an interruption in the telling at this point.]
127. Upon seeing that it was like that.
128. They say he went walking upstream.
129. Walking, walking, walking, walking. . . .
130. He went until he found a canoe.
131. There's a house, it was white [like a roof appears when seen from afar].
132. Well yes, they said he went to the house.
133. Upon seeing, they say he went to the house.
134. In that, all the people were sleeping.
135. He went there and woke them up.
136. They are snoring.
137. They are sleeping.
138. They say because he saw them then.
139. The Chämberara.
140. At that hour.
141. They are sleeping in the daytime.
142. Yes it's already now [the narrator refers to nighttime, the hour in which he tells the story].
143. At this hour they are like rabbits.
144. Now then, as it is this hour, they awaken.
145. In that, he remained watching.
146. Well "this is how they are," they say he said.
147. Now then, as it was already this hour, they began collecting the baskets.
148. To cut down the pejibaye fruit [*Jëa*].
149. Already day [for them], they went.
150. They waited for him.
151. For Jëröpoto, it was night then.
152. Well then, looking at him.
153. They went looking.
154. He stayed in the house, seated.
155. He stayed asleep, asleep, asleep. . . .
156. Then now in the morning, when it was now becoming, they say, now they come.
157. They are arriving.
158. They, the Chämberara.
159. Bringing pejibaye fruit.
160. Well then, yes, it's in pots that they cook.
161. But then, they say they are going to eat.

162. But they do no more than smell with their noses, they say.
163. Well like that, they say he said:
164. "This is not eating," they say he said.
165. "We don't eat," they say they said.
166. Well then he said: "How do you shit?"
167. "We don't shit in assholes."
168. "We are closed," they say they said.
169. "Well, if you would like, I will cut you assholes."
170. Well then, there was a boy.
171. They say, [Jëröpoto] liked that one's body.
172. He felt sorry for him.
173. Well then they say, like this he asked:
174. "You don't shit?"
175. "We don't shit," [the boy responded].
176. Well then, they say mouth below [upside down].
177. They say he said, they stayed mouth below.
178. They stayed, then, when he touched it, it was so smooth.
179. "Ah! you can shit!" they say he said.
180. "We can shit."
181. In that, they say he got a machete.
182. And then yes, he left an asshole cut out.
183. When after he cut it, they say they continued shitting, now, like that.
184. Well, then yes, they say he said: "Eat."
185. They say he said: "Like I am going to eat."
186. "Then you will continue shitting," they say he said.
187. Well then, he was among the Chämberara one year cutting assholes.
188. Then he was there, he was, he was. . . .
189. A woman liked him.
190. Well, then she stayed with him.
191. He was there, he was, he was. . . .
192. The woman was already pregnant.
193. Well, till in that, the others said to him:
194. "You can go above."
195. "Here's the road."
196. "There's the road," they said.
197. They knew from whence he came.
198. The Chämberara.
199. Well then, he was already bored there.
200. They bored him.
201. They showed him, "In this road you go."
202. In this path, path, path . . .
203. You are going to leave for there above.
204. Well, they said he did it like that.
205. He went and the woman was pregnant.
206. He went there above.
207. Well, then he, then he went to where he was.

208. He went and arrived there.
209. Well, then again he asks.
210. Again he went.
211. Well, "This guy, he hasn't died," they said.
212. "Again he comes," they said.
213. "This one, how are we going to kill him?"
214. Again then, they say they said.
215. Your mama was killed by this Uara [type of wild beast].
216. Well, "If she was killed by that, it's fine," they say he said.
217. Again he made a platform.
218. Well then, they say he went.
219. "Where is it?" they say he went.
220. "There it is," they say he was told.
221. Well, they say he went once again.
222. To see first.
223. He went to see.
224. He would see.
225. Then he went to see.
226. A little girl with white hair was seated.
227. On top of a rock.
228. Then he went.
229. Then yes, he was conversing with her.
230. "Where is," they say he said, "the Uara around here?"
231. In that, she said: "There is none here," she said.
232. Actually, in fact it was the same one [she was the beast].
233. Well then, after asking like that, he came.
234. "It's fine," he said.
235. Well then, he came to the house and stayed asleep, asleep.
236. Then at midnight, to the owner of the house he asked:
237. "Where is my mother?"
238. "The Jë [dragon] killed her."
239. "If it's the Jë that killed her, that's fine," they say he said.
240. And he sharpened a machete.
241. Just right, not too big, not too small.
242. With a sharpening stone he sharpened it well.
243. "Where is that Jë?"
244. "It's below," they say he said.
245. Well then, they took him there.
246. Because they wanted to kill him in this way.
247. They took him there.
248. Well, there it was clear that the Jë would eat him.
249. Well then yes, he was bathing.
250. He was there.
251. He was brave, like God left him.
252. Like that he was left.
253. When he was bathing like that.

254. The water was threatening.
255. They say the river was rising.
256. When in that, to the top.
257. They say the Jë comes leaving.
258. Comes leaving with eyes too big.
259. Comes to the top.
260. When in that, they say, he took him below.
261. They say no one has left.
262. It took him.
263. They say the water remained smooth.
264. In that, Jëröpoto died, they said it is said.
265. They say the Jë ate him.
266. Well then, the word was already spread.
267. It was two days that he was dead.
268. They say they thought.
269. But then, "Where is he going to die?"
270. Then he is inside.
271. But then he, he is searching for the heart of the Jë to cut it with his machete.
272. Well then after he had the heart of the Jë thus.
273. He cut it.
274. And when the Jë opened his mouth.
275. They say he left.
276. He left, they say he brought it to the house.
277. "Look at the heart of the Jë," they say he said.
278. They wanted to kill him.
279. They couldn't kill him, it is said.
280. Well then, finally then, "Therefore we [women] will kill him."
281. Then he, in that way.
282. Changed into mosquito, all the flies, turned into that piece by piece.
283. He turned into, they say he is that, mosquito, horseflies, black flies.
284. He turned into all of this.
285. He did not die.
286. Like that he lives asking for blood.
287. So he turned into that.
288. He would live asking.
289. To here no more was my story.

Note on translations: Line length is roughly determined by narrator's pause; commas indicate pause of shorter length than period/line; my own or translator's [TN] notes are indicated in brackets. Because of the nature of the material in other writing, narrators and translators are not identified here by name.

*Life cycles and moon-blood logic*

The moon regulates natural cycles. Women's production of moon-blood (menstrual blood) is a manifestation of this power. It is a power that cannot be taken from women even in cultures where all the heroes are men. Jëröpoto's desire to drink moon-blood and his attempt to knock down the moon challenge the celestial power accorded to women. His attempt fails, I think, not because of the nature of celestial power, but because the idea of celestial power has been used as the foundation for the cultural construction of Emberá being. The consequences of his challenge are thus unacceptable to men and women alike.

Moon-blood is a paradoxical sign. When considered in the reproductive context of a woman's entire life cycle, moon-blood signifies fertile continuity, the possibility of future conception. But when considered in the context of one month's cycle, moon-blood is a sign of failed conception, of non-pregnancy, death of the egg and sperm. Jëröpoto's desire speaks to tensions between mothers and sons, women and men. His desire also works with the paradox of human being through modulations of a transcendental equation: moon - blood = death + life.

Life is laced with death (a frightening thought). To think of moon-blood is to think of mixing death in life. To think with moon-blood is to do something about this fear: by erasing this sign of mixture other antithetical events which fall between life and death, like illness, can be moved to what is now one side or another in our minds. Removal gives the full feeling of presence. Life is constructed so, in infinite small acts of removal, overlapping subtractions, summed, register what's left as being in reality. This, the cultural construction of reality, is threatened by Jëröpoto. He wants to drink up the people's repressed resolution of paradox.

But what is his desire for moon-blood? What does it mean when he desires to know who killed his mother when who killed her was himself?

Around his desire, the story draws a space. On one side of the space is a world in synchrony with light and life, on the other side, a world of phantasmic disorder. The story fills the space with figures of fear, the kind who turn back those more ordinary heroes of other stories who would test the separation. But like some avid comic book reader entering fantasy, the figures do not threaten Jëröpoto; indeed, they stoke his unwholesome desire. Surrounded by a multitude of smaller beasts feeding upon the cow monster, he spears wildly. He slips by the Uara whose inscrutable form takes that of a little girl with hair white from age. He kills even the river serpent Jë, bellyfull of children. Jëröpoto succumbs to none.

He climbs into the sky on a piece of bamboo that grows up with the sound of its name *"chogorro, chogorro, chogorro. . . ."* Just when he is about to grab the moon ("The moon," the women said, "killed your mother"), a woodpecker, icon of precise masculine technique, breaks off his rise. Foiled in the attempt to disrupt moon's cyclic measure, he falls through the air like soft fluff calling out the name of the balsa wood flower *"mojopodo, mojopodo, mojopodo. . . ."* Then aiming for a tree, weighted with the quality of a dense blue rock he calls its name *"mopauwara, mopauwara, mopauwara. . . ."* But he falls too far, past our world and into the world of the Chämbera.

The Chämbera's world is in reverse: daytimes of sleep and nighttimes of work. They cook the palm fruits *jëa* only to inhale the steam. They cannot eat because they have no assholes, or their assholes have only the tiniest holes, like a sieve through which excretions the size of cockroach turds squeeze. Closed, their lives are shadows of the real. They are living phantoms inscribed with backward traces of humanity (sometimes with backward traces that are specifically *gringo,* but that's another story). Jëröpoto cuts them open from behind and drinks the blood. He has sex and gets one of them pregnant. Bored after a time, he takes a path back to the real. The women tellers say he brings back the palm fruits *jëa* and other fruits people do not know from the land of the Chämbera. Star apples, guava, all kinds of fruit that are now, in the time of the real, familiar elements in dooryard gardens: "These he split open and gave to the people to eat, gave to the people to try, delicious they were." Instead of fruit, the man teller says he finds a big soccer ball of gold. In any case, the son who asks for menstrual blood not milk, the tabooed substance of feminine sexuality, returns with bounty. The mothers negate his desire to drink, to know death in life, so that cultural schemes founded on secret separation can be sustained. Yet they cannot negate him completely, or separate too keenly, for it would be to no avail, and they too want the fruits of his transgression.

Jëröpoto is not a passive victim in a moral tale; he throws the repressed back into the face of culture. He will not stop searching for the truth of his mother's death that is his birth; he will not stop asking for that substance whose state of being creates thoughts of not life or death but idles uncomfortably between. He will not stop challenging the other-world absence that is at the center of everyday presence. The women try to kill him by sending him off to find an impossible revenge, but desires can never be eliminated, merely displaced. He returns always with enough bounty and bravado to ask again. When the women finally take the killing into their own hands, they succeed only in fragmenting his hideous desire into an infinity of insects and vampire bats that span

mythic time to enter the now, sucking on the blood of people and their dogs. Trying to kill uncultured desire, the myth's women only reassign it to nature. Myth turns nature's parasites into its own proof, and, taking up its own transgression as subject, encloses nature's myriad movement in its eternal structure. Bitten by flies, one teller of this tale is wont to say, "See it's Jëröpoto. He's still here."

*The meaning of mythic transgression in historical time*

Separation and movement between everyday and otherworld is not only a metaphor for thinking about transcendent problems such as life and death. Equally important, and indeed, what keeps the myth itself alive, is its relevance to events in historical time. The fruits and gold Jëröpoto brings back from the world of the Chämbera are analogous to the pots and pans Emberá men bring their women from the world of townspeople of other race. Of course, the blacks and *campesinos* are human too, but not quite in the same way that the Emberá have defined their own humanity. Town with its always somewhat strange inhabitants is, in the mythic scheme of things, at the margins of the otherworld, mediating between the Indian's home upriver and unknown mazes of distant *gringo* cities.

The real problem is a variant of myth: how to get what you want from the unfamiliar world of others without risking overlapping, negating distinctions which together come to mean Emberá person, Emberá culture. Women want the otherworld things their labors in field and orchard produce by way of this uncertain exchange between their men and men of other race. Yet this exchange implicates transgression, and they must manage it carefully. The Emberá sense of reality, and the possiblity of curing illnesses resulting from threats to this sense, rests on the fundamental separation between life and death. It is this that is at stake in the women's control of sexual substance and their relative exclusion from the outside world.

Yet fundamental or not, the separation is, after all, created only in the symbolic. For as experience proves, or as the Emberá might say, "in truth," these domains of thought and being will always interpenetrate. If not for active, continual separation of things which mix features, distinction collapses. With active, continual separation, distinction can be recuperated. Consider, for a moment, what would happen if women abandoned their role as reproducers of the familiar, everyday world as a domain distinct in place and kind from the otherworld, either phantom or foreign. To think this through, however, the scope of analysis must first be extended outward from the primordial removal of ambivalence in the form of menstrual blood into the everyday maintenance of separa-

tion, i.e., keeping house, the Emberá way: like cutting and hauling great green bunches of plantains on backs and legs strong from walking and childbirth; climbing up the notched pole on the hearth side of the house and laying down the weight; and after a dip in the river, blowing on the coals to set kindling alight in the center of the star formed by three logs; putting on the big blackened pot with water from the river brought in U.S.A. grade pig tail plastic buckets carefully balanced on the head; sitting to slice one by one the resinous peel down the side of the plantains, pulling toughly but just right so the plantain meat comes clean, ready to be boiled—the womanly preparation of a meal, a transformation of raw to cooked, a separation of inedible from edible, waste from sustenance, and a teaching of this, a keeping in order. Housekeeping with all the modulations of separation and care is done the Emberá way using practiced movements of traditional beauty.

The Emberá way is condensing around the domain of women and rare old men. Here, the Emberá way is constructed tenaciously, furiously in and against an otherness encroaching on land, resources, identity. Traditional domesticity was perhaps never so urgent as in this threatened terrain, where inevitable links are being forged to initiate interchanges that now stretch across this region mapped and targeted by planners only twenty years ago as a place where practically nobody lived. Never so urgent yet never before so unprofitable, for women to continue this task of definition that requires all that falls in the category non-Emberá to be to them untouchable. (Of course, new things and ideas from the outside can be appropriated as Emberá, but this requires mediation, usually of a masculine sort). Yes, their task has become one of definition, more popularly known as ethnic identity, in the complex, money-health care-education-distributing field of national politics: here again we find women's entrance into history. Here, silent and sardonic, women don't abandon the job of reality-maker, reality-marker, even as they suffer the consequences of the relative powerlessness of the domain that already is, reserving for their mates the power inherent in that which might be obtained through connections to the state. Power is always obtained through quest, and according to Emberá tradition, those who quest are men. Women's powerlessness is of growing proportion and has a sudden cash quality. Unable to make decisions about the lives they tend on this terrain restructured and masculinized according to national standards, one by one, women may abandon the mythic task. Slowly but surely they may forget that unspoken things are speakable, that things are made to be the way they are, and people, habituated, need to be reminded of this and laugh at their necessity for enchantment. Slowly but surely the women and their men may accept the versions of the Jëröpoto myth that can be

found in books where menstrual blood, the key to a resolution of paradox, is suppressed more concretely and completely by a printed stamp of legitimacy. And they may accept the foreign myths where star apples and palm fruits can all be equally traded for the green-colored paper, because their myths may be gone and they'll think it all only natural. If present circumstances persist, they and all the people will be assimilated—if the women abandon their role—according to this interpretation.[8]

*The construction of gendered subjects: a ritual and a fishing party*

They are here, about twenty-five children and adults, at the place called Epave after the tall wild cashew tree that once grew here. The river deepens as it turns sharply, a good place to fish for the celebration that is to follow the graduation of two boys from the village school. Guests will be coming upriver for the event, and if the people don't catch fish the boys' parents will have to buy food as well as booze. Some of the fishing party arrived at the chosen site last night, camping out on the wide sand and stone beach that graces the river's edge in the dry season. The rest came this morning, in groups of four or five, cutting through the forest instead of following the river's longest bend, then criss-crossing up the river's wide avenue holding five-gallon bucketfulls of mashed *dokan* leaves, the fish poison plant (*Clibadium sp.*). When they arrive, some women walk inland a short ways to gather giant green leaves of *hoja vijado* to wrap the *dokan*. Others get cooking fires going. These tasks are divided amongst the women without much comment by age, predilection and degree of relation to graduating boys.

In the midst of the merry commotion, the girl Paloma is subdued. Eyes cast down, she and her younger sister swim across the river. Each holds up an arm with flaming sticks to kindle the fire their mother is making up on the rock ledge opposite the beach. They swim back and forth twice more with cooking pots. I sit with the women. Into each wide leaf we place and fold about a pound of mashed *dokan,* tying the bright green packet neatly with a cord stripped from the leaf's own center vein. We make about thirty packets in all and hand them to the men and boys standing in the river below. They place them into underwater holes in the rock wall, abode of the armored catfish *jumpé* (*Chaetostomus sp.*). Then they fence off the holes with large leafy branches. When all is ready, the men jab at the submerged packets with metal spears, releasing the poison that gets fish drunk. Always the jester, Paloma's uncle shouts that the *jumpé* is growling and pretends that the fish is pulling him into the hole with his spear. By the time the fish escape through the branches, they confuse sky, sand and rock, swimming in crazy, erratic patterns. The

men and boys are ready at the entrance, looking down into the water. But today the poison is not working quite right. It is supposed to take effect quickly, but it's past noon and the packets were broken over an hour ago. After an hour and half they finally start coming out in greater numbers. Slipping into the river, Paloma joins the other girls in their retrieval of the mad, wounded fish their brothers and fathers throw over towards the bank, delivering these to their mothers' respective baskets and cooking fires. As I watch her I wonder how she is feeling, for it is her first day out after being "closed in."

The Emberá are known for their shamans and stories, but except for healing, not for their elaborate rituals. Indeed, after living amongst them for several months I was convinced that they didn't really use ritual enactments outside of shamanic healing. Even puberty rituals seemed lacking. To my probes, they responded with shrugs. But one afternoon when almost everyone was out of the village working, I climbed into one of the houses. As I sat down to enjoy the cool quiet, I noticed an unusual leaf-walled enclosure about six by four feet, just slightly bigger than the single-person sleeping tent which was hanging inside its four walls. It was there on the sleeping platform. "What's that?" I asked Paloma's brother-in-law and his wife, who were sitting next to the enclosure. The brother-in-law answered, "It's Paloma, she's closed in (*cercanumua*)."[9]

Paloma, who was experiencing her first menstruation, stayed in that area just big enough to lie down in for one whole week without ever leaving. Her mother passed food to her, removed her excrement in a chamber pot, and helped her bathe with clean water every little while through the day and night. Following local custom, there were no particular food taboos, but the girl/woman was not allowed to utter a word the entire time she was enclosed.

Despite the visual barrier surrounding her body, an Emberá girl's first experience of sexuality is not a personal affair. Because of its symbolic relation to dangers inherent in states of liminality, similar in import to the archetypal times of The Flood and Easter, the first moon-time experience must be fixed carefully into society's structure. The personal experience of feminine body transformation is coopted by relatives. Signifying the danger of mixing death with life, and possible crossing from the everyday into otherworld, the blood and the body that produces the blood must be hidden from view. Clear water eventually replaces the blood's stain assiduously cleansed from Paloma's body.

Inadequate removal invokes mythic memories of Young Woman (*Awëra*) who gets extraordinarily fat during the enclosure ritual for her first menstruation. As she gets fatter, she gets heavier and sinks little by little into the earth until she arrives at the world below. She is the sister of

the Mother of Fish, and she is still down below in the time of now. When she moves, there are tremors on earth.[10]

Menstrual blood is like disease; although one is a substance and the other is a state, both pose hesitantly between life and death: thus the logic of speaking about menstruation in the discourse of disease. Her brother-in-law explained to me that it was Paloma's first moon-time and was therefore a time of great danger, both for her and everyone else. "If you don't treat it right, you may get *granos,*" he said, using a Spanish word for skin eruptions of various kinds. He continued to explain that even after this week of enclosure, Paloma must persist in minimizing her contact with other people. I could find out no more. The whole situation was wrapped in denial. She seemed all right a week after her enclosure ended, that day on the village fishing trip, but she never could bear to speak about the experience on any of the occasions I tried to bring it up. After all, she was given no words with which to conceptualize her body's change.

According to custom, after the period of enclosure the girl now woman becomes available as a sexual partner. She simultaneously loses the possibility of participation as assistant in shamanic ritual. (This will be sad for Paloma, who loves to make the perfumed water and adorn her body with flowers and black paint in preparation for her grandmother, the village shaman.) The beginning of reproductive life is marked by a consensual loss of purity that must be regained through constant awareness and work. It is the moment that the control of sexuality's dangerous aspect begins to govern a woman's movements. The one-and-a-half foot length of *paruma* cloth that enclosed her lower torso is replaced with a three-and-a-half foot length cloth, sealing in the destiny of her sex. Leaving her soon to be milk-laden breasts bare, her torso is hidden in a *paruma* that hampers her stride, making it impossible to run and leap in the forest with the same freedom as men.

The people fishing at Epave that day don't get much surplus for the graduation celebration, but we all eat plenty that afternoon. Paloma prepares a plate of roasted catfish and plantains and saying "here" hands it to her brother, a six-year-old. He looks at her, stands up and walks to the far end of the rock ledge. There he sits with his back towards her and says "Bring it to me here!" She acquiesces without protest. As we all move around in the sunlight, each one appropriately according to gender and age, I wonder again what she is feeling.

Menstrual blood is a completely feminine substance, yet because of its extraordinary locus in the symbolic field, it is invested with great social significance, becoming the principal vehicle for training youth to think of themselves in gendered terms. After the first appearance of moon-

blood, a ritual installation of absence, its periodic presence is never mentioned or brought out into view. Women are trained to control the substance; concealment is not a matter of choice.

But while moon-blood may be the least visible and most potent of liminal substances, it is not the only such one that falls strictly within women's purview. The assumption of gender identity is no simple matter. Women are responsible for, as they are identified with, the removal of all substances that incorporate qualities of anti-nutriment from the home. I was always amazed when tiny children, who rarely communicated with a strange person like me, would nevertheless recognize my womanhood in time to insist on the removal of a splat of chicken shit from the floor. Women's daily activity in the home is a continual process of replacing dirt with cleanliness, messiness with order. And it is through this activity, all so basic to the division of survival work, that the otherworld is kept out of the everyday. The dangerous contagion that proceeds from disorder and ambiguity is held back. In a stunning victory of mundane practice in the symbolic, shit is forced to retreat before the constant replacement of food in the service of reproduction and menstrual blood is never seen at all (Douglas 1966; Bourdieu 1985).

*Thinking in gendered terms, or, the primitive habits of the scholarly*

The withdrawal and empowerment of menstrual blood has been a subject of ethnographic inquiry since the early work of Frazier. Take, for example, this fragment in which he describes on a global scale the same phenomena we discuss here:

> Thus Zulu girls, as we have seen, believe that they would shrivel to skeletons if the sun were to shine on them at puberty, and in some Brazilian tribes the girls think that a transgression of the rules would entail sores on the neck and throat. In short, the girl is viewed as charged with a powerful force which, if not kept within bounds, may prove the destruction both of the girl herself and of all with whom she comes in contact. To repress this force within the limits necessary for the safety of all concerned is the object of the taboos in question. (Frazier 1981:242-43)

In anticipation of structuralist insight, Frazier recognizes that "The uncleanness, as it is called, of girls at puberty and the sanctity of holy men do not, to the primitive mind, differ from each other." And that the dangerous and precious can be nowhere "so safe and so harmless as when it is neither in heaven nor in earth, but, as far as possible, suspended between the two" (1981: 242-43). But by inserting the short phrase "to the primitive mind," he distances himself and his culture from this recognition too subversive to take for one's own. Several decades after Frazier,

processes of category formation revealed thus in our scrutiny of "primitive mind" were shown by Lévi-Strauss' monumental work to be characteristic of human thought processes generally. And as Douglas (1966) and Leach (1964) have shown, exotic rites that deploy the anomalous substance of menstrual blood to create social order turn out not to be so different in thought from polite English snickers at the word cony.

That we have managed to raise the status of the "primitive" to our own in our analyses is certain. What is less sure is the emerging question of primitivity, expressed scientifically now, in ourselves. For without questioning our own primitive reliance on repressed symbols, we shall keep repeating the presumptions of myth. If we begin, as does the myth of Jëröpoto, by thinking of menstrual blood as already polluted, then we too will go on believing in, and being contained by, our own manner of producing domestic purity.

Recent feminist approaches to society and culture have begun to investigate precisely the logic that presumptions obscure and the historically particular reasons that it is nearly always women who are placed in categories somewhat tainted, as if menstrual blood were the only substance available for symbolic deployment. Why, in a semiotic process in which things, like the sounds of language, acquire meaning only in relation to each other, rather than by any essential quality of their own; why, in a process that is in theory arbitrary, are women, in practice, systematically made into an untouchable class evocative of desire and desire's angry inversions? From the Zulu to the updated feminized version of the Frazierian holy one: the beautifully dressed women on a ready-made pedestal—what are the particular social needs for which women are expected to sacrifice? And how do these social needs enter and set the emotional lives of young women in such a way that they come to defend them as their own? These questions open up mythography, which outside structuralist theory seems to be somewhat antiquated, and inside structuralist theory, somewhat divorced from ethnographic reality, to what are now central issues in social theory: the relation of myth to real social practices, and the operation of myth in the complex and contradictory field of cultural production.[11]

*Duplicity and omission as textual strategies*

The Jëröpoto myth is a vehicle through which Emberá reflect, wonder, laugh a bit anxiously about and recreate the peculiar state of human being that is theirs—that is, when they are among themselves or among others who do not threaten their image of themselves. When they are among those of other kind who do threaten this image, the myth becomes a vehicle through which the Emberá re-present their state of being to

others. That's when they tone down the peculiar. In this process of representation, the text is transformed somewhere between teller's articulation and mythographer's transcription. The story's meaning, its particular cast, is a result of this moment structured by forces outside of the text, outside even the immediate context of telling. The moment is structured by the history of cross-cultural communication which precedes the relationship between any particular teller and mythographer. The text's coherence is produced in this moment, appearing as if it were a whole piece of Emberá culture. The mythographer can then take the text and present it as a social fact, using the text to transform the chaotic complexity of social life into a discursive form coherent in her or his own culture (letting the text do our work for us, so to speak). Or, the mythographer can discover why and how myth-makers produce the particular texts they offer us and we take up as our social facts. Taking the latter approach, we can analyze traditional Emberá culture and popular culture within the same field, the global field of cultural production where indeed they contend. Hall's remarks on popular culture restate these thoughts and join them to the problem at hand:

> The meaning of a cultural form and its place or position in the cultural field is not inscribed inside its form. Nor is its position fixed once and forever. . . . It seems to me that the cultural process—cultural power—in our society depends, in the first instance, on this drawing of the line, always in each period in a different place, as to what is to be incorporated into "the great tradition" and what is not. (italics in original) (1981:227-40)

Omission of the menstrual blood motif calls for a consideration of textual production as a communicative act in which power relations are negotiated. By raising the question of who is actually responsible for "drawing the line"—teller, translator or mythographer—the omission expands and politicizes our notion of myth-making and mythography. It is possible that the mythographers who came before me were the agents of omission, leaving out mention of the menstrual motif the same way they substitute the euphemism 'digestive organs' for 'assholes' (Emb. *ampuruara*)—just a polite repression, conscious or unconscious, in the printed translation.[12] But based on my understanding of the Emberá manner of communicating with outsiders, I think it more likely that the Emberá themselves, either tellers or translators, are responsible in the moment of production. Moreover, the text itself provides them with the choice of making the omission or not. The myth of Jëröpoto encodes duplicity within itself. This encoding precedes the moment of production, and, extrapolating from our contemporary sample, has generations

of storytellers as its author. It is not unlike the representations of shamanism which use the word "devil" interchangeably with the Emberá word for spirit (*jai*). For non-Emberá Christians, the word "devil" connotes evil, while to the Emberá themselves, the word "devil" is synonymous with "*jai*," and continues to connote spirits of multiple form whose potential for good or evil is determined by the heart of the shaman who directs them. In the same way, the text's duplicity has allowed its meaning for the Emberá to survive through the history of cultural confrontation by encoding a modified meaning specifically for critical non-Indian audiences within different versions of itself.

The discovery of the omission directs us to a concrete manifestation of an oppositional relationship between myths—their myth of themselves and their myth of themselves for us. In his defense of studying translated versions, Lévi-Strauss (1981) touches on this topic:

> These oppositional relationships between myths, which can only rarely be observed at their actual inception, are brought out strongly by comparative analysis. Therefore, the reason why philological study of the myths is not an absolute precondition is to be found in what might be called their diacritical nature. Each of their transformations results from a dialectical opposition to another transformation, and their essence lies in the irreducible fact of translation *by* and *for* opposition. From an empirical point of view, every myth is simultaneously primary in relation to itself, and derivative in relation to other myths; it does not exist *in* a language and *in* a culture or sub-culture, but at their point of articulation with other languages and other cultures. (italics in original) (1981:645)

The spirit of Lévi-Strauss' statement is akin to mine here, and indeed, forms the basis of my thinking about myth as part of a broader process of cultural confrontation. But the particular conclusion he draws is symptomatically opposite. The passage continues:

> Therefore a myth never *belongs to its language,* but rather represents an angle of vision on to *a different language,* and the mythologist who is apprehending it through translation does not feel himself to be in an essentially different position from that of the native narrator or listener. (italics in original) (1981:645)

Everyone is outside myth for myth is oriented between, but is everyone equally outside? While it is true that I identify with the mythic problem of women in the Jëröpoto text, what I bring to my reading of it is not what Emberá women bring. It seems to me that it is precisely because myth exists between cultures and languages that the difference in apprehension between native myth-maker and foreign mythographer is signif-

icant. The act of communication itself deserves analysis not only for its contribution to our understanding of human thought processes or Emberá society as a unique entity, but also as an instance of the Emberá entrance into our contentious history.

We have two basic texts of the Jëröpoto myth, one containing two motifs to represent Jëröpoto's motivation, the other of which contains only one. His desire to drink menstrual blood and his desire to know who killed his mother when who killed her was himself are two motifs which serve the same function within the syntagmatic structure of the text, i.e., they both establish the motivation of actors. They are therefore substitutable within the paradigmatic structure. This fact presumably enables us to grasp the substance of the myth, i.e., the *story* that it tells, if not the recovery of the omitted motif itself, using Lévi-Strauss' method of analysis (1963; 1981). However, the implications of textual variation produced by duplicity seem to offer a special insight regarding the process of oral transmission, for these variants are not of the same order of which Lévi-Strauss speaks, those in which "probabilist levels [resulting from personalities of successive narrators] will rub against each other and wear each other down, thus gradually separating from the text what might be called its crystalline parts" (1981:627). Despite the successive personalities of generations of tellers, or better yet, *because* of them, myth analysis can hover a while in historical time before jumping into the timeless anonymity of human nature.

*Of women, missionaries and mythographers*

Created in the context of colonization, the duplicitous texts are reproduced now in the context of development. Tax collectors, text collectors: from the Emberá point of view, they may just be variants of the colonizer transforming again like the devil. The social imagery encompasses real actors with its interpretive modes and in order to comprehend its effects, we must maintain critical awareness of how we fit into the scheme of things. We must pay special attention to key features which we might not ordinarily think necessary to objective analysis, or as a consequence of our own repression, not want to think explicitly about at all: our own gender, race and place in the power structure, as well as the modes of thought that hold us there.

In Darién, the only white *gringos* most of the Emberá have ever seen were missionaries or gold hunters. The only white *gringo* women were missionaries, and I seemed to do a great deal of talking to distinguish myself from them. I told the Emberá I didn't believe in the little old man with the white beard in the sky and this seemed at first to surprise them. I emphasized my secular intent in my everyday interactions, and it did

make a difference in the kind of things they shared with me. For instance, I was allowed to attend curing rituals whereas non-Indian Christians generally could not. They told me that these others might scare away the curing devils. I was also allowed to watch the transformation of a tree to a canoe, a technical procedure which requires magical devices to prevent intrusion of illness-causing devils. It is for these reasons, in addition to my womanhood, a feature that some of the previous collectors shared, that I and not they, heard the more complete version of the Jëröpoto myth.

The different tellings were triggered by a difference in identity between myself and the other mythographers, all of whom were men and/or missionaries, or so I suggest here. In further support of this idea is another strategic omission. A few months after Paloma's enclosure, I spoke to a woman who is an Evangelical missionary then living in a village upriver from ours. She told me an explanation of the enclosure rite that an old woman gave her. The difference between the explanation given her and that given me stimulated my thinking about how Emberá conform representations of their culture to the orientation of foreign guests, especially where women or magic are concerned. The description of ritual practice is almost the same except in detail. In the explanation given the missionary, the girl is not completely restricted to the enclosure as Paloma was. Instead, the people cut a new path to be used that week by her alone to walk to the river for her baths. Although this does tone down the rite's severity, I take this difference in procedure to be indicative of the variation with locality that is characteristic of Emberá ritual practice. What is more interesting than the description of ritual procedure, however, is the explanation of the logic behind the procedure. In this, the old woman says nothing to the missionary about the girl's danger to others, only the danger for the girl herself. Concern for the "afflicted one" becomes the full explanation, concern for those endangered by contact with the "afflicted one" is suppressed. If the menstruating girl should catch something or scrape herself during this time, the old woman said, the consequences could exceed those normally expected. In proof, she showed the missionary scars on her legs that she never lost from just such an occurrence during her own time of enclosure. According to the old woman's explanation to the missionary then, it is for the girl's sake that these procedures are carried out. According to what Paloma's brother-in-law told me, the girl poses a serious danger to others.

In my interpretation, if I may include yet a third line of sight, the girl is fixed within a web of signification that imposes itself upon her and transcends both her and her relatives. The logic, articulated by kin relations, captures the girl, making her simultaneously victim and

woman whose responsibility it is to insure the dominance of the logic. But the logic does not correspond neatly with the Christian code of charity as it is presented to the Indians, and thus I suspect the old woman delicately modifies her exegesis to meet the best of the missionary's expectations. And that exegesis contrasts with the one given me. And so the process of mutual mythologizing extends outward from text, ritual enactment and exegesis and meets us here in our scholarly tellings. There are contradictions to be, if not resolved, at least discovered, that have to do with our relationship to our myth-tellers. These contradictions are made more problematic still by our troubled relationship with ourselves.

## CONCLUSION: WHAT'S LEFT

With the sign of menstrual blood removed, emotion is leached out of myth. Transgression is made superfluous, for there's nothing transgressive in a young man asking about his mother's death. Without his perverse desire, the myth does not fascinate. Without the menstrual motif, other interpretations are still possible and true in their own way, but they must nevertheless all bear a masculine bias by default.[13] Fertility, magical power, adventures of misbegotten treasure, all will give us a perspective on the Emberá way of thinking about life, but these ways will seem to be divorced from women's active participation. If limited by this motif's omission, scholarly interpretation is constrained to reproduce the world in which women's restricted place in social life is accepted naturally. With the blood washed away in seclusion, her purity appears to be, like her sex, an accident of birth rather than her cultured construction.

A vivid sign of menstrual blood weights the mythic code with emotion twisted, turned out by the tellers into roomfuls of people. Left in the text, the motif permits an interpretation of women's active relation to Jëröpoto's strange desire, one that shows how women manage the man-son's transgression. They keep him away from the substance that mixes death in the center of the real, sustaining the separation so basic to the people's enchanted sense; but they take the fruits he offers too. And the myth lives in historical time, for Jëröpoto sucks blood still, and otherworld *gringos* tempt Emberá men and women strangely from afar.

No, the storytellers and translators are not informants merely. They are cultural representatives. As they tell or translate their stories for us they actively think through how they, via the text they produce, will figure into this history—which they know already transformed through myth—and which they now enter anew. The problem in Emberá ethnography is not the omission and duplicity itself, but how the discovery of omission

and duplicity forces us to confront the uses to which we put our manufactured mythographies. Will we have the courage to use their myths to understand and challenge the myths that obscure our hearts and fracture our intentions, or will we just go on, collecting more exotic versions of our own myths about ourselves?

*Council for International Exchange of Scholars*
*Panama*

## NOTES

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1. The author's fieldwork in Panama was funded by the Organization of American States and the Institute of Latin American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. For ethnographic background on the Emberá see Stephanie Kane (1986). Also note, Emberá words are spelled as is Spanish, with the letter /j/ sounding as an English /h/. The double dot /¨/ over vowels indicates nasalization.

2. The fifteen versions have been collected among the Emberá as well as the closely related Waunan, Catio and Chamí. They have been compared and synthesized by the following authors: Luis Velez Velez (1982:153-79); Luis Vasco (1985:105f); Constancio Pinto Garcia (1978:112-27,248-53).

3. For theoretical writings concerned with the articulation and effects of power in discourse see Michel Foucault (1980); and on the politics of scholarly interpretation see Edward Said (1983:135-59). For approach to textual analysis that focuses on what is absent from the text, including review of feminist authors, see Jonathan Culler (1982).

4. For a review of Emberá history, see Héctor Castrillòn (1982).

5. For method of interpretation that expands outward from the text in a series of horizons, see Fredrik Jameson (1981).

6. Etymological data is from Luis Vasco (1985:121-22). Note that the presence and absence of nasalization on the vowel in /Jë/ is probably due to variations among dialects of Emberá.

7. The version summarized in the text is a summary of the first one I recorded. The teller is a man. I choose it here because it is the most complete, i.e., has the most number of episodes. In comparison with the two versions told by women, it is also presented in a manner more understandable to Western readers.

8. This interpretation is intended to bring the cosmological dimension into discussions of the historical and material forces which shape women's position

in particular societies. For examples, see Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock (1980); Rayna Reiter (1975).

9. *Cercanumua* means to be closed in, from the Spanish verb *cercar,* to wall in, and the Emberá state of being verb *numua.* It is a word used more generally to refer to things like the enclosure of animals, although I have also seen the same kind of structure built in other situations where privacy is required. For example, one was built in the town of Yaviza to close off a patient and her Emberá shaman from street view. For other descriptions of the puberty rites of the Emberá and their sister linguistic group, the Waunan, see Reina Torres de Iannello (1950); Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff (1960:75-158); George Stipeck (1976:77f).

10. This myth is recounted in Vasco (1985:114), from Milcëades Chaves (1945:152-53).

11. This discussion ties into the Nature/Culture debate in feminist anthropology; see Michele Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (1974). For theory of meaning in language referred to here, see Ferdinand de Saussure (1960). For discussion of recent social theory, see Anthony Giddens (1979).

12. For example, Constancio Pinto Garcia (1978) uses the phrase "digestive organs" in Spanish when he cites the version collected by Madre Marëa de Betania (1964:50f).

13. Luis Vasco (1985) offers an interpretation which discusses the Jëröpoto myth in relation to his theory of shamanism. William Harp (personal communication) is working on an ecological interpretation of the myth.

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